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Using National Teleconference for Strategic Planning

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Registered Nurses across Canada have expressed interest in the University of Victoria School of Nursing's post-basic baccalaureate degree program, the whole of which is available by distance education. This nation-wide interest arises from a variety of reasons including:

- the demand by nurses for access to post-basic university programs, which exceeds the places available
- the fact that not all provinces have a program
- the requirement of some programs that students be full time
- personal factors preventing many registered nurses from attending on-campus programs
- the fact that mobile nurses employed by the armed forces, federally employed nurses and Red Cross employees cannot attend on-campus programs
- the requirement for Registered Nurses to have a baccalaureate as a minimum level of entry to practice in the year 2000.

The University Extension division of the University of Victoria does deliver the program to nurses outside of B.C., but with increasing demand, a process for making decisions about nation-wide access was clearly becoming necessary. An advisory committee was therefore appointed consisting of 17 representatives from provincial nursing associations, federal government agencies and universities across Canada. This advisory committee communicated through national teleconference, funded by the Division of University Extension.

The overall purpose of the Steering Committee on Distance Education was to advise the University of Victoria with respect to increasing the availability of baccalaureate education to registered nurses using distance education methods. The following Terms of Reference were established by the co-chairs and agreed upon by the committee. Specifically, the committee will provide information and make recommendations about:

1. Alternative ways (by distance) to increase the availability of baccalaureate nursing education to registered nurses.

2. Supports and barriers to increasing the availability of baccalaureate nursing education (by distance) to registered nurses.
3. Alternative methods of collaboration among nursing degree granting agencies and other relevant organizations and groups regarding the above.
4. Resources (human, clinical, already developed courses/programs, financial, other) available or required to support distance post-R.N. baccalaureate education in various regions of the country.
5. Research/evaluation approaches and other standard maintenance mechanisms to ensure that the quality of whatever education approaches result from the work of the committee is maintained.

Five teleconferences, each with a preset agenda, were scheduled three to four weeks apart. The time between teleconferences allowed for planning and preparation of the next meeting. With the consent of all participants transcriptions of the tapes were used as records of the meetings.

During the teleconferences the advisory committee identified several issues of concern. Not surprisingly, many committee members were concerned about the issue of clinical experience. Most provinces are experiencing difficulty in the limited placements for community health experience. Increasing numbers of students requiring this experience would further strain community capacity. A related issue is supervision of these students.

Another significant issue was portability of credits if students are mobile or chose to take either part or the majority of courses from either the local or out-of-province university. This issue is related to the number of credits required to obtain a degree from a particular university. Some members felt that a barrier may be that nursing university programs use different nursing models. Some discussion took place regarding solutions to problems but it was limited compared to problem identification.

This national teleconference was successful as determined by several criteria.

- Experts, geographically distant, were able to meet collectively.
- The national teleconference was a cost-effective strategy for planning.
- The goals of assessing the feasibility were reasonably accomplished.

Much remains to be done, and the Division of University Education and the School of Nursing continue to address this important issue: a School of Nursing faculty member is now working on models to implement a program available to nurses outside British Columbia.

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